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HHS Official 'Stonewalling' House Committee Charged With Investigating Pandemic, Lawmakers Allege

During a contentious House hearing Wednesday, a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services official evaded lawmakers' questions about her agency's response to the pandemic and its failure to produce requested documents related to COVID-19 vaccine approvals, vaccine mandates and booster guidance.

By **Michael Nevradakis, Ph.D.**

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A U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) official on Wednesday evaded lawmakers' questions about her agency's response to the pandemic and its failure to produce requested documents related to COVID-19 vaccine approvals, vaccine mandates and booster guidance.

Melanie Egorin, Ph.D., HHS assistant secretary for legislation, was the sole witness to appear before the hearing held by the U.S. House of Representatives Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic.

"When the Select Subcommittee requested documents, HHS ignored our letters and provided suspect excuses," said Rep. Brad Wenstrup (R-Ohio), chair of the subcommittee, in a statement released before the hearing. "When we asked for important testimony, HHS seemed to purposefully mislead Select Subcommittee investigators."

"This pattern of avoiding accountability to the American people can not, and should not, be tolerated any longer," Wenstrup added.

In November 2023, the subcommittee subpoenaed HHS. During Wednesday's hearing, Wenstrup and other Republican lawmakers again threatened the agency with a subpoena and "further congressional action."

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HHS 'continues to stonewall this committee'

In his opening remarks, Wenstrup launched into a scathing criticism of HHS and Egorin, who heads the office that responds to legal requests the agency receives.

"I've read your opening statement," Wenstrup said. "Frankly, it's somewhat insulting. There's no significantly relevant facts or data in there. There are no explanations for the questions we have. In fact, it raises more questions than it does answers."

Remarking on the November 2023 subpoena, Wenstrup said HHS "assured us things would improve and your testimony was unnecessary. The department's compliance has not improved to this day."

Wenstrup cited documents HHS provided "with unnecessary and some illegitimate redactions" and "documents that are simply unrelated to our request," including "hundreds of pages of news articles," which Wenstrup said, "simply seems to be a tactic to inflate your productive page count."

Egorin claimed that redactions in records HHS provided to the subcommittee were meant to protect "personal information" of "government officials" and "public servants" mentioned in the documents, "for their personal safety."

"The COVID-19 pandemic should not be partisan, it should not be controversial, but it needs to be based on facts — facts that you have that we are not getting," Wenstrup said.

Noting that Congress created HHS, funds the agency and "has the absolute right" to oversee it, Wenstrup said, "The department's honesty and cooperation is non-negotiable."

Wenstrup outlined instances when the subcommittee requested documentation from HHS, including information about the origins of COVID-19, the process of approving the COVID-19 vaccine, the Biden administration's school reopening guidance, the implementation of COVID-19 mandates, COVID-19 booster guidance and other issues.

HHS was largely unresponsive, Wenstrup said.

Regarding requests for HHS records on COVID-19's origins, for instance, Wenstrup said the documents the subcommittee received were "more redacted than FOIA [Freedom of Information Act] productions" or were "non-responsive to the questions or [were] copies of press articles."

Wenstrup said it took "two follow-ups, a subpoena threat and scheduling transcribed interviews" before HHS delivered documents regarding the Biden administration's school reopening guidance.

For requests related to the implementation of COVID-19 vaccine mandates and booster recommendations, Wenstrup said HHS has "not produced a single document."

In response to a request for records related to the use of personal email by an employee of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease (NIAID), Wenstrup said HHS did not deliver documents on the basis that "It was an internal investigation."

Wenstrup said that's "an excuse that's not founded" because the subcommittee is conducting its own investigation and has "oversight over HHS."

Egorin acknowledged that her office "serves as the primary link between the department and Congress, which includes facilitating responses to Congressional oversight." But she also frequently relied on pre-prepared talking points.

"HHS has a demonstrated record of working diligently across a broad range of oversight requests from Congress including this subcommittee and is committed to continuing to engage in good faith," she said, adding, "We have produced 35 productions totaling more than 10,000 pages, including a production just this week."

Egorin also praised her agency's mission to enhance "the health and well-being of all Americans." She said:

> "We accomplish this mission every day by providing effective health and human services by fostering sound sustained advances in the sciences, underlining health medicine and the social services.
>
> "We protect Americans from health, safety and security threats both foreign and domestic and we oversee the safety, effectiveness and quality of foods, drugs, vaccines, and medical devices."

Egorin also used the hearing as an opportunity to praise the Biden administration, saying that HHS would "continue to work to ensure Americans are safe and have access to care and support they need," citing the agency's administration of "more than 7 million COVID vaccines."

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HHS accused of 'intimidating witnesses and interfering with their testimony'

Wenstrup brushed aside Egorin's claims, arguing that she and her agency have attempted to "run out the clock" of the current Congressional session.

In one exchange, Wenstrup asked Egorin whether the 274 pages the subcommittee received "regarding the approval of the Pfizer COVID vaccine" was "the entirety of responsive documents in the department's possession."

Egorin replied, "We did produce documents and we are happy, if that is a priority for the subcommittee, to go back and continue to work with your committee to respond to that request."

When Wenstrup pressed for an answer as to whether HHS would "produce every responsive document in the department's possession," Egorin said, "What I commit to you is to continue to work with the staff's priorities and to continue to do productions. Some of the requests that we got were incredibly broad."

Wenstrup countered:

> "You argue that our search terms are too broad despite the fact that we have continually negotiated with your staff to scope these requests.
>
> "If you don't want to answer my questions about process, that's fine, but I'm going to continue to ask them and the record will show that you're not answering."

Wenstrup also accused Egorin and HHS of obstructing witness testimony. "The night before each interview, you personally issue a memo to the subcommittee and the witness, instructing the witness as to what they can and cannot testify to."

Rep. John Joyce (R-Penn.) accused HHS of "stonewalling" multiple House committees, including the Committee of Energy and Commerce, saying that requests from both bodies "have been ignored repeatedly" by HHS.

Joyce mentioned an Aug. 1, 2023 request concerning the development and implementation of vaccination policies and mandates, saying the subcommittee received no documents.

"And yet you told me that you have been responsive. Is there a reason why this information has not yet been produced?" Joyce asked.

"We have shown a good faith accommodation to work with this subcommittee and the Committee on Energy and Commerce," Egorin claimed. "We did provide a response and if it is a priority for the subcommittee, I'm happy to continue to work with you and work with the staff."

"We on this side don't see that responsiveness," Joyce said.

Regarding documents pertaining to an NIAID employee's use of personal email, which Wenstrup described as an "illegal … evasion of transparency laws," Egorin said that she "cannot speak to internal investigations and timelines, but I'm happy to get back to you."

Wenstrup, pressing Egorin, produced a memo in which she appeared to instruct the NIAID employee not to divulge information regarding his official work.

Egorin acknowledged that she personally approved the memo, saying it was "a longstanding practice of the department" to provide such memos, which she claimed were "advisory."

"It seems the department council treats these memos as mandatory and I think there is an argument to be made that even by issuing them, the department is intimidating witnesses and interfering with their testimony in violation of the law," Wenstrup said.

NIAID is the agency formerly headed by Dr. Anthony Fauci.

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Subcommittee accused of obstructing preparations for 'the next pandemic'

In contrast to Wenstrup's animated opening statement and line of questioning, the subcommittee's standing member, Rep. Raul Ruiz (D-Calif.) posed a softer set of questions, appearing to praise the work of HHS while claiming Republican subcommittee members were obstructing preparations for "the next pandemic."

"The department has also worked to make a dozen current and former federal officials available for more than 80 hours of testimony, correct?" Ruiz asked. "And just to confirm, you've made all these efforts on a voluntary basis, correct?"

"I've called for a focus on the forward-looking work of preventing and preparing for future pandemics," Ruiz said, "But instead of doing this work, our first hearing of the new year is focused on creating a false narrative … for Republicans' partisan gain."

"This is not putting people over politics, this is putting politics over people and the critically important work of preparing for future pandemics," Ruiz added.

Ruiz also appeared to promote the zoonotic theory of COVID-19's origin — that the virus crossed over from animals to humans.

In one instance, he asked Egorin, "What steps has HHS taken to prevent, control and respond to the emergence of zoonotic diseases?"

Egorin responded, "One of the things coming out of the COVID pandemic and other lessons learned is really looking at how we do better at data collection and coordination across the department."

"There is no consensus as to whether this leaked from a lab or whether it was a zoonotic origin," Ruiz later claimed. "We should be focusing on what the administration is doing to help prevent a future pandemic, whether it's a lab leak or whether it's zoonotic."

"We have not seen or heard so much as a shred of evidence substantiating their claims of a coverup of the pandemic's origins or suppression of the lab leak theory on the part of Dr. Fauci," Rep. Jill Tokuda (D-Hawaii) said.

In February 2023, the Department of Energy found SARS-CoV-2 likely emerged from a lab leak at China's Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV).

HHS accused of covering up SARS-CoV-2 origin

During the hearing, lawmakers addressed EcoHealth Alliance, which has been implicated in gain-of-function research at the WIV, the alleged site of the SARS-CoV-2 lab leak, and a January report in the Wall Street Journal that a Chinese lab mapped the genome of SARS-CoV-2 two weeks before China publicly revealed it.

"We wonder why HHS has blocked witnesses from discussing EcoHealth's current grant status," Wenstrup said." Rep. Marianette Miller-Meeks (R-Iowa) claimed HHS is "covering for EcoHealth and for NIAID," which Egorin denied.

Referring to the Journal's report, in which Egorin was quoted and which was entered into the Congressional record at Wednesday's hearing, Miller-Meeks asked Egorin why HHS did not share information about the genome, despite being aware of it in December 2019.

"Is it not important, if a genetic sequence was released on Dec. 28, that that would be important to developing vaccines, important to developing testing?" Miller-Meeks asked. "And why wasn't that information shared? When did you know about the sequence? … Why wasn't the committee informed or Congress informed?"

Egorin responded, "The documents related to this in the letter that you quote was when we informed Congress, when we came across a responsive document, I believe, and I need to double check that that was provided."

"You've yet to say when you had access to the document, when HHS knew of this and why it was not reported," Miller-Meeks said. "I would say this is extraordinarily important for preparing for the next pandemic.

Miller-Meeks added, "I find your response to be lacking and I think it, in fact, creates impediments to us going forward to prepare for the next pandemic."

Democrats accuse Republicans of vaccine 'skepticism', promoting 'unhinged conspiracies'

Other Republican members of the subcommittee also expressed frustration with HHS.

"It's both unfortunate and unacceptable that you and HHS do not take your accountability to Congress and, by extension, to the American people seriously," Miller-Meeks said. Rep. Ronny Jackson (R-Texas) said Egorin's "inability to provide the pertinent information is either deliberate or it is complete incompetence."

"When agencies like HHS refuse to cooperate with requests from Congress, you are not only insulting this institution, you are insulting and disrespecting the American people," Joyce said.

"I find it very hard to believe that somebody that is in charge of this, that knows that they're coming in front of a committee that has, for a year, requested information, knows nothing and will just get back to us, even though you probably won't get back to us because you haven't for a year," Rep. Debbie Lesko (R-Ariz.) said.

But Ruiz praised Egorin:

> "I've had the pleasure of working with Assistant Secretary Egrin on numerous fronts and she's been nothing but forthcoming and cooperative in all aspects of our work.
>
> "To characterize the department's behavior as intentional obstruction when it has time and time again been responsive to this committee's request is a gross politically calculated mischaracterization."
>
> "Under the guise of determining COVID-19's origins, the majority has pursued a politically motivated probe, vilifying our nation's public health officials and politicizing the intelligence community in the process."

Rep. Robert Garcia (D-Calif.) said, "These investigations into the Biden administration and our public health officials are really quite shameful." He characterized them as a "hatchet job on our nation's health officials," accusing Republicans of spreading "unhinged conspiracies" and "forcing their extreme ideology on the American people."

Garcia said:

> "This is the same majority that encourages skepticism … and attacks on our healthcare system … even [the] COVID vaccination process and vaccines in general.
>
> "They've encouraged … followers on social media to ignore recommendations of doctors, to ignore vaccinations for children, comparing getting vaccines to essentially causing mass harm to the American public, which we all know is both shocking and incredibly irresponsible."

Along similar lines, Ruiz said, "We have a debilitating distrust in our nation's public health systems that was manufactured, and we have childhood vaccination rates at an all-time low."

Rep. Deborah Ross (D-N.C.) also appeared to speak for HHS, saying it "has consistently worked to address the majority's requests and expedite their stated priorities."

HHS threatened with new subpoena

Unsatisfied with Egorin's testimony, Republican members of the subcommittee threatened HHS and Egorin with new subpoenas and other potential sanctions.

"I just hope that we get ourselves in a situation pretty soon … where we can do something to make you take the oversight of Congress seriously," Jackson said, promising to find ways to "fence off some money to your organization. We're going to have to do something drastic."

In his closing remarks, Wenstrup said, "If we don't receive explicit answers for the record, unfortunately we'll be forced to evaluate a subpoena to receive the outstanding documents and further testimony." .

A press release the subcommittee issued today stated that "further congressional action" is "on the horizon."

Watch the hearing here:

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Michael Nevradakis, Ph.D., based in Athens, Greece, is a senior reporter for The Defender and part of the rotation of hosts for CHD.TV's "Good Morning CHD."

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holisticpoet
2 days ago edited

I have watched several people testify before congress. Among those are Fauci, Walensky, Myorkas, and several others that do not answer questions, or answer questions that were not asked instead of answering the questions asked. If I could be king for a day I would order them to answer directly and let them know that if they refuse to answer satisfactorily, they would be incarcerated until they decide to answer. I bet it wouldn't take long for everyone to start to answer the questions they are being asked. We have a complete lack of accountability because there are no repercussions to acting badly and until there are we can expect the same occurrences.

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Francoise Vanasse White
2 days ago

None of these unelected, arrogant officials appear to be competent or a willing participant to work through critical issues that directly affect we the people. Though it appears they are being called on the carpet... It all looks like theater to me. No one is held responsible, no one is ever charged. Nothing ever changes. I can't ever remember some significant political leader or official (since Nixon, and even watergate did not expose the depth of criminal depravity) actually be charged, found guilty and go to prison. It's always some poor patsy to take the fall. I have lost faith in our government decades ago. Nothing surprises me. The only difference I see in the present actor/clowns is the BRAZEN and unbothered contempt they present in these useless, circus-like subcommittee interviews. It's all for show, its theater. I am so grieved

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> **CastleConnell** → Francoise Vanasse White
> a day ago
>
> I agree
>
> 1 0 Reply • Share ›

notaluvvie
2 days ago

Come on, let's get real. How do expect a "health official" to obtain a well paid sinecure with a herbicide and insecticide company, eg Pfizer, et al if h/she/it tells the truth. It may be that hanging around all those deadly chemicals has caused the "official" to "not remember" a la Fraudci.

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Countrygirl1411
a day ago

"again threatened the agency with a subpoena and "further congressional action."
There is the problem, they continue to threaten and don't act on those threats. The agencies know nothing will be done so why should they comply.
Stop with the treats, if they don't comply the first time start having people locked up.

4 0 Reply • Share ›

p. gutierrez
2 days ago

Why Wenstrup thinks anyone from HHS will give him the documents relating to SARS-CoV-2/Covid-19 origin (or vaccines) he requested, is mindboggling. Child-like trust is those who participated in the murder of millions. Fauci's NIAID was, and is part of HHS. What would the HHS gain, by providing documentation regarding Fauci's NIAID, Ralph Baric, and the Atlanta CDC part in helping create Covid-19? HHS would literally be cutting their own necks. Wenstrup does better spending his time on waiting for Jesus's return, doing good for the poor and homeless, than spending his time trying to get documentation from the HHS and the Atlanta CDC.

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CastleConnell
a day ago

They seem to have the Fauci game down, deflection, verbal sophistry, burning up time, canned answers that are meaningless. So, Congress is bringing the horses to the well and the horses are not drinking. Now what? This is ridiculous, what would happen to a defendant in a court on the stand slithering around questions and using such tactics, it wouldn't be tolerated. If these sessions are just an exercise in trying to nail jelly to the wall, better strategies and real consequences are needed.

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jann
a day ago

I would not have the patience Wenstrup shows. I have to turn off any hearing when Ruiz blabbers.

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